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Marketing transformation in tourism through visual ethnography

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Abstract: This paper analyses the role of transformative tourism from the perspective of local establishments. The method is based on a visual ethnography study where 12 ecological accommodations located in Catalonia, north-eastern Spain, were asked to identify a photography that illustrates the philosophy of the establishments. Results discuss the meanings of the pictures focused on previous research in relation to the transformative facilitators. The physical, knowledge, social and psychological dimensions are analysed. The nature, the wood, and the relaxing areas are the most relevant elements provided by the hotels as part of their marketing strategy. Theoretical and practical implications are described.

Keywords: ecological hotels, tourism transformation, visual marketing.

1. Introduction

Personal transformation is part of what conscious travelers search for in their tourist experiences and also of what conscious hosts want to offer to their guests. What does transformative travel involve both from the demand and supply perspectives? Which are its main effects? This study aims to understand how hosts can be agents of change for the creation of tourist experiences that transform, thus providing guests with more valuable experiences. How can tourist accommodations create the right conditions for guests' transformation to take place? How can guests also be agents of change through travel? These questions will be answered from the perspective of tourism supply. The desk research shows

the conditions that have to be present for transformative tourism experiences to take place. After, the study investigates the role of hosts for the creation of transformative tourism experiences through the analysis of the message that the accommodations' owners want to transmit to their guests through the most precious spaces of the establishments as part of a marketing strategy.

2. Transformative tourism

After doing literature research, one of the definitions that can best describe the concept of transformative tourism is the one given by Sheldon (2020). She explains that transformative tourism consists of "a process" where tourists experience an

internal journey that “is part of the awakening of consciousness, and creates more self-awareness, more self-inquiry into the purpose of life, living by a higher set of values, and making greater contributions to others” (p.2).

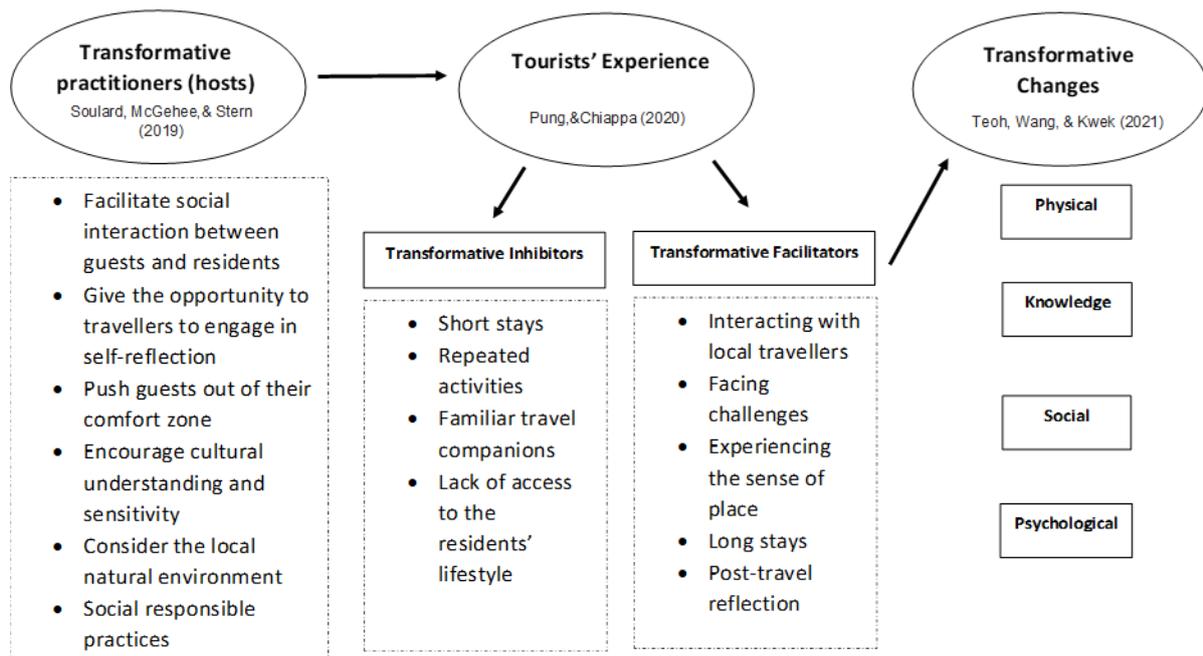
Sheldon is not the only expert that uses the term ‘awareness’ when describing transformative tourism, and other experts such as Reisinger also uses this concept to express that tourist transformative experiences bring a higher “awareness of one’s own existence and a stronger connection with self and others” (Reisinger, 2013, p.27).

Transformative travel evokes transformative tourist experiences (see Morón-Corujeira and Fusté-Forné, 2022), which lead tourists to a self-exploration and

profound intra-personal changes (Brown, 2013). In other words, transformative travel does not provoke momentary changes, but prompt sustained - after the trip - permanent, and life-changing actualisations of tourists’ perceptions of the world and of themselves (Pine and Gilmore, 2013; Kirillova, Lehto and Cai, 2017).

The transformative travel process is summarized in Figure 1. First of all, the role of tourist hosts in the creation of transformative experiences is explained. In the second place, the transformative inhibitors and facilitators that determine whether transformation within the tourists’ experiences can happen or not are shown. Finally, the transformative changes that explain why guests can be agents of change are also explained.

Figure 1. Transformative Travel Process.



Own source derived from Soulard, McGehee and Stern (2019); Pung and Chiappa (2020); Teoh, Wang and Kwek (2021).

This figure shows the main role that tourist hosts have as agents of change by promoting and creating transformative travel experiences. Hosts, such as tourist accommodations, should create the right conditions for transformative tourism. Soulard, McGehee and Stern (2019) give high importance to the promotion of social contact between tourists and locals, the encouragement to face challenges, leaving the comfort zone, and engaging in environmental and social responsible experiences.

Moreover, these same experts propose a glocalization strategy with three key elements for organizations that want to provide transformative tourist experiences for their guests (Soulard, McGehee and Stern, 2019).

1. Designing their operations taking into account the wellbeing of the host community. The culture and wishes of the community have to be integrated in the design of the tourist experiences. The community's cultural and natural values can be used as well as a transformative force.

2. The main role that employees have in the creation of transformative experiences. They are the bond between the tourists and the host culture. Tourist enterprises should be run by people that have previously gone through life transformation through travel.

3. Designing a physical environment that facilitates human contact, community involvement, and interaction with nature in order to create places that encourage transformation.

All the mentioned practices that can be created by tourist hosts are directly linked to the majority of the transformative facilitators identified by Pung and Chiappa's study. Social interactions with residents provide tourists with a further sense of the destination, encourage self-reflection, can imply facing challenges,

and, thus, promote transformation. Moreover, long stays can provide tourists more sources for reflection. The longer the length of the stay is, the more likely it is that tourists undergo transformation, as all the transformative facilitators are more likely to occur. On the other hand, short trips are not found to stimulate reflection or transformation (Pung & Chiappa, 2020).

Also, depending on the travel's characteristics, guests undergo sustained life changing actualizations or not. The transformative facilitators mentioned in the figure are the ones that bring transformative changes to tourists. Those changes can be classified into four different dimensions according to Teoh et al. (2021):

- Physical: it refers to physical change and skill development, which are tangible and noticed by travelers. For instance, through contact with local nature, tourists can develop new skills. An important skill that guests acquire is an increased self-efficacy, which they gain through the challenges and the problems that they solve during the trip. The challenges that tourists face and which can cause an increase of their self-efficacy are diverse: learning the local language, communicating with residents, interacting with people from different countries and cultures, discovering mistakes in hotel or other activities' reservations, negotiating travel plans with their companions, or being far from their comfort zone and social support (Pung and Chiappa, 2020).

- Knowledge: guests can learn new knowledge on better lifestyles that without their tourist experience would not have been possible to acquire. Through transformative tourist experiences, guests perceive personal enrichment, which can be defined as the development of new knowledge and the provision of long-lasting memories (Pung and Chiappa, 2020).

- Social: through transformative experiences, tourists change their mindset

towards others, become more open-minded and more tolerant. Moreover, tourists eliminate their pre-concepts about other cultures and destinations (Pung and Chiappa, 2020). Tourists, through a better appreciation of other cultures, traditions, lifestyles, values and beliefs, can create better social bonding with residents. The more intense the cross-cultural engagement of their experience is, the more likely it is they go through social transformation (Sheldon, 2020).

- Psychological: transformative travel leads to self-exploration, gaining new perspectives and creating a deeper one's identity.

3. Study method

This research adopts a qualitative methodology based on a visual ethnography. This study is part of a project that analyzes the role of ecological tourist accommodations for a regenerative tourism development. A part of the project's qualitative research is used in this study to focus on the ecological tourist accommodations' role as agents of change for the creation of transformative tourist experiences that can serve as 'game changers' for our current tourism system.

Given that the examination of the environmental certificate's significance is also part of this study's goal, the sample is composed of two different groups, both located in Catalonia. On the one hand, a sample of tourist accommodations that have an environmental certificate. On the other hand, a sample that lacks this kind of certificate. The environmental certificate that has been taken as a benchmark is the EU Ecolabel for tourist accommodations. The reason for choosing it is that EU Ecolabel is the only sign of environmental quality that is both certified by an independent organization and valid

throughout Europe (European Commission, 2022).

The first sample included the ten tourist accommodations located in Catalonia that have the EU Ecolabel certificate. All of them were contacted but due to their availability six out of the totality conformed the first group sample. Six other Catalan accommodations without environmental certificates were selected to conform the second group sample. In this case, a non-probabilistic sampling method was used, and concretely a convenience sampling was applied. Sustainability is integrated in the way of working of the participants of both samples, but the difference is that accommodations in the first sample have the environmental certificate while the ones in the second sample do not.

For this particular study, the first author, who conducted the interviews, asked the managers of the interviewed accommodations to select the most representative aspect of their business. The question was "What is the object or space in the house that most identifies with the philosophy of your accommodation?".

The aspect selected by each ecological tourist accommodation was then photographed by the researcher in case the interview was conducted on site. For those interviews which were conducted virtually, the managers sent by email the photograph (or indicated where to retrieve the photograph from their website) which they considered the most representative of the establishment. After compiling the 12 pictures, the researchers analyzed its meaning in relation to the transformative factors explained in the theoretical section and observed in Figure 1. To reduce bias, both researchers worked separately and collaboratively to classify the pictures and describe the factors that communicate 'how' and 'why' the ecological tourist accommodations engage visitors in a transformative tourism experience.

4. Results and discussion

This section shows the 12 pictures that the 12 accommodations that participated in the study identified as part of the interviews. For the analysis purposes, this section is divided into the four dimensions explained by Teoh et al. (2021): physical, knowledge, social and psychological.

4.1. *The physical environment as a source of novelty*

The first section embraces the pictures that show the natural values of the places where the accommodations are located. In this sense, three of them have highlighted the environment as the symbolic representation of their accommodations. This is illustrated in Figures 2, 3 and 4, which show the relevance of the environment where the houses are built and the tourist experience takes place.

The natural landscapes represent the surroundings of the places where the host-guest relationship is negotiated and they specially refer to the combination of three natural elements: the mountains, the trees, and the skies, sometimes blue and sometimes cloudy. The figures do not only show the natural landscape, but also the places from which to observe the landscape. Figures 2 and 3 show the panoramic view from the accommodation, and Figure 4 the tents with the mountains at the end of the picture.

Figure 2. Cal Candi (provided by the owner)



Figure 3. L'Avenc (own source)



Figure 4. Càmping El Berguedà (retrieved from the accommodation website)



Rural areas are destinations that feature bucolic landscapes which are a major tourism attraction factor and this is a pivotal element in tourism marketing.

4.2. *New knowledge towards memorable tourist experiences*

The environmental factors do not only refer to natural values, but also to cultural values. In this sense, the cultural and natural factors learned with the interviews are also displayed with the pictures selected by the owners. Guests can learn new skills on better lifestyles through their tourist experience.

The practice observed in Figure 5 reflects the accommodations' desire to show their guests the positive aspects of self-sufficiency in terms of food supply through practices such as free-range poultry farming. This type of practice can help guests to reconnect with nature where the

hotels offer local-based menus from farm to table.

Figure 5. Masia Casajoana



Figure 6. Lo Cel do Toló (retrieved from the accommodation website)



Figure 7. Mas Corbella (retrieved from the accommodation website)



The interviews show that rural accommodations want to communicate to their clients the importance of slow tourism and also the need for moments of pause and calm in their lives. Figure 6 exemplifies it: guests can learn to light the fire, an ancient practice, enjoy a talk, as a way of socialization, and observe and learn to identify the constellations as they immerse themselves in a self and social reflection.

While this can happen as part of a shared moment with other guests, and the owners, the room itself is also a space where this state of reflection may happen. In this sense, only one accommodation highlighted the room as the most relevant element from a visual perspective, as observed in Figure 7. In addition to nature (we can observe the trees through the windows), the room showcases a terrace and the wood as a material of construction.

4.3. Understanding local practices for social wellbeing

Accommodations are willing to bring their guests closer to the local lifestyles of the area where they are located. They do not want guests to end their stay without knowing how locals live. Environmentally concerned establishments want guests to learn about the functioning of the economic and social life of the area's residents, as well as their values and concerns.

Figures 8 and 9 illustrate the use of products such as wood. Figure 8 is an example of an establishment that identifies its philosophy with the wood that is produced in its geographical zone and used for the construction of houses in the area. In addition, Figure 9 shows that the accommodation links its philosophy with timber as an example of economic practice. In this sense, it is essential to not lose the essence of the places where the tourist experience takes place.

Figure 8. Hostal Éller (own source)



Figure 9. Somlom (retrieved from the accommodation website)



The accommodations convey their environmental concerns through their indoor and outdoor spaces. They want to show guests that we should stop thinking that natural resources exist to serve humans. Tourist establishments transmit that a mindset change is necessary for citizens to realize that they need to serve nature, as it is nature that takes care of us and allows us to be alive.

An example of the transmission of these values can be seen in Figure 10. The accommodation has a feeder for the birds, thus enhancing the biodiversity of the area and bringing guests closer to nature. This demonstrates that with small environmental practices, substantial improvements can be made in our environment, leading to the improvement of the communities' quality of life.

Figure 10. Casa Leonardo (own source)



4.4. The tourist transformation

As a result of the visual ethnography study, some pictures show that a tourist transformation can be based on the natural landscapes, the cultural lifestyles and sustainable practices. In this sense, spaces that promote self-exploration and self-improvement as part of the tourist experiences are observed in three examples.

Figure 11. Casa Miret (own source)



Figure 12. Escarabat Verd (provided by the owner)



Figures 11, 12 and 13 are areas of the hotels which are ‘silent’ places to relax and think about the overall experience, the knowledge acquired both in relation to the inner and outer spaces, and the practices that we, both as locals (when we are back home) and visitors (when we are at a destination), could implement ourselves to transform people as tourists and tourism as a system.

Figure 13. Les Cabanasses (retrieved from the accommodation website)



Figure 11 represents a hammock, Figure 12 shows some seats and a table near the fireplace inside the house, and Figure 13 is a garden with chairs and tables, outside the house. All of them promote a slow-paced

experience among visitors, and accentuate this connection with the places they visit.

4. Conclusion

This research shows the importance of hearing the ‘stories’ of local accommodation owners. In particular, through asking them to illustrate the meaning of their experience with a photograph, this research demonstrates the variety of perspectives. After the analysis of the pictures, results show that the elements identified in the visual ethnography are aligned with the dimensions provided by Teoh et al. (2021) in relation to the role of transformative tourism.

What are the transformative facilitators that can promote tourist transformation? The analysis of marketing transformation in tourism through visual ethnography, based on the study of 12 ecological hotels located in Catalonia, shows that physical, knowledge, social and psychological dimensions are connected with a transformative tourist experience.

Results show that all the dimensions are closely related to each other. For example, nature is present in the four sections, and the wood as a local-based element is also relevant as part of the visual materials - for example, the house is made of wood, the room has wood elements, and the spoon they use to cook is made of wood. In addition, the spaces to sit and relax - where to explore oneself and the environment - are also crucial in the understanding of the transformative tourist experience.

This research has theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, it contributes to the study of tourism transformation (see Ateljevic, 2020) based on the perspective of local accommodations as hosts. Experts agree on the fact that those life-changing

actualisations evoked by transformative travel can transform guests into potential agents of change (Pung, Gnoth, & Del Chiappa, 2020) by:

- expanding a greater sense of inclusiveness and belonging to the World (Pritchard, Morgan and Ateljevic, 2011; Reisinger, 2013).

- fostering awareness about the ecological and social impacts of the way we consume (Neuhofer, Celuch and To, 2020).

- advocating for social empowerment and environmental protection in tourists' communities (Coghlan and Gooch, 2011; Pung, Gnoth and Del Chiappa, 2020)

From a practical perspective, this study informs tourism stakeholders about the added values of the tourist experience. In this sense, the study reveals the elements that better protect and promote the values of the hotels and may serve to other establishments to place themselves in a transformative tourism system and to destination management organizations to include transformative experiences to their marketing strategies. The main limitation of the research is that it is focused on a sample of 12 establishments, and it relies on 12 photographs identified by each of the establishments. Further studies could expand this analysis to other types of establishments and geographical locations.

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Isabel Coll Barneto is a recent graduate of the double degree in Business Administration and Management and Economics at University of Girona. She has started the research in the field of regenerative, conscious and transformative tourism through her final degree projects. She will start her career in the field of auditing and wants to complement it with research into the development of new tourism systems that are in line with the regenerative tourism's principles.

Author profile



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